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Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?

1

It is a scandal of culture that there has never been a widely accepted theory of comedy, to organize the general sense of the subject and to orient particular studies within it. Since Aristotle there has been a theory of tragedy, more or less the same one. (Hegel's and Bradley's theories have different emphases but are compatible with it and relate to their object in a similar way.) But each theorist of comedy has worked in a vacuum. Nevertheless each has set out boldly to do the whole job—as though Aristotle had merely omitted to do it.

As bad as the state of affairs itself is that we do not know *why* it is so. Determining its causes may be equal to solving the theoretical problem itself, and as difficult. A speculation: each theory of comedy faces a double task—to account for comic forms, i.e., the laws of comic discourse, literary/dramatic/(filmic), and to account for the phenomenon of laughter, and of course to relate the two. Perhaps, in different ways, each theory of comedy has shattered or distended itself on this double task. The more successful theories, notably Freud's, tend to concentrate on one of the tasks and to ignore the other, though this entails incompleteness.

No theory can deal with both questions successfully; yet each must try to do so because the questions are linked. Producing laughter is a fundamental effect of comic discourse,* hence it is a part of the art of comedy writing, directing, acting, which no treatise can leave out. The two

phenomena are linked but they seem to lie along different axes.

Henri Bergson's theory of comedy as the mechanical encrusted on the organic is exposed as simplistic by the case that it seems to fit best: Buster Keaton. The latter's creative mis-adaptation of objects to various survival needs is a positive evolutionary force. So is his turning his body into machines of various sorts to surmount various perils, such as becoming a pendulum to rescue his fiancée from a waterfall in *Our Hospitality*.

Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*¹ (1905) may well be the best book on the subject, but it limits itself to the simplest of comic discourses, the minimal unit of humor—the joke, epigram, or humorous remark. Hence it is of more limited value to our inquiry than might appear. A comic film such as *Bringing up Baby* (1938) contains many jokes and instances of humor in Freud's sense but is not reducible to them. Its construction, effects, humor operate on several levels at once. No single element may be understood by itself either discursively or in regard to spectator relation, only in relation to the multi-tiered whole. Although the book is one of his most brilliant, Freud was no more satisfied than the reader seeking a full treatment of comedy. James Strachey reports that Freud's other books of the period (*Interpretation of Dreams*, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Three Essays*) were expanded and modified almost out of recognition in their later editions. Half a dozen small additions were made to *Jokes* in 1912 but no further changes were ever made in it. References to it are rare in the other works, but in the *Introductory Lectures* he speaks of it having temporarily led him aside from his path; in the *Autobiographical Study* there is an apparent

*Dare one call laughter a rhetorical effect? No, because the figure may be written and no one laugh. In comedy we identify the figure with the effect—as though metaphor were dependent on audience effect to be that.

depreciatory reference to it. Twenty years later he returned to the problem with a short paper on "Humor" (1927), which recasts the subject by the metapsychological scheme id-ego-superego.

In the cases of practitioners Ben Jonson and Lope de Vega the *absence* of a theory of comedy became the foundation for their thinking on the subject. In Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humor* (1600) there occurs the following remarkable speech by Cordatus.

No, I assure you, signor. If those laws you speak of had been delivered us *ab initio*, and in their present virtue and perfection, there had been some reason of obeying their powers; but 'tis extant that that which we call *Comoedia* was at first nothing but a simple and continued song sung by only one person, til Susario invented a second; after him, Epicharmus a third; Phormus and Chionides devised to have four actors, with a prologue and chorus; to which Cratinus, long after, added a fifth and sixth; Euppolis, more; Aristophanes, more than they; every man in the dignity of his spirit and judgment supplied something. And though that in him this kind of poem appeared absolute and fully perfected, yet how is the face of it changed since! in Menander, Philemon, Cecilius, Plautus, and the rest, who have utterly excluded the chorus, altered the property of the persons, their names, and natures, and augmented it with all liberty, according to the elegance and disposition of those times wherein they wrote. I see not then, but we should enjoy the same license or free power to illustrate and heighten our invention as they did; and not be tied to those strict and regular forms which the niceness of a few, who are nothing but form, would thrust upon us.²

In his poem "The New Art of Making Comedies" (1609), Lope de Vega argued that popular comedy ignores rules.

The true play like every kind of poetic composition has its proposed goal, and that has been to imitate the actions of men and to paint the customs of their age. Any poetic imitation is made up of three things: speech, rhythm, harmony or music. . . .

For a subject tragedy has history and comedy has feigning; for this reason comedy was called flat-footed, of humble plot.³

2 Fifteen Kinds of Snow

The Eskimos have special names for many different kinds of snow (fifteen, if I remember rightly) because variations in the quality of snow greatly affect their living . . . A different name for snow implies a different kind of hunt. Some names for snow imply that one should not hunt at all.

—Kenneth Burke, "Literature as equipment for living."⁴

Romantic comedy: a genre, a family of genres (marriage, manners, screwball), a category of

production and marketing, a category of analysis, a realm of specialties (Ernst Lubitsch, Gregory La Cava), a notion. Definition, even delimitation, is difficult or impossible because all Hollywood films (except some war films) have romance and all have comedy. We might specify "comic *about* the romance" but nearly always at least some of the comedy concerns some of the romance. A workable subset "romantic comedy" might refer to those films in which romance and comedy are the primary components or to those without other such components as crime, detection of crime, Western adventure, war, etc. But what is "primary" in a given case is difficult to determine where romance and comedy are pervasive. Moreover, even if crime, westerns, war, etc. films are eliminated, the remainder is vast and its modes of conjoining romance and comedy myriad.

3 Special Names

It may be that subdividing romantic comedy into its component types or genres will further analysis of it. The definition that is elusive might be easier to accomplish at a level of greater particularity. Let us take "screwball comedy," a term one finds in critical contexts of all sorts. Beneath the common term, however, there is no agreement, neither from critic to critic nor within the work of a single critic. The weekly critics use the term again and again without definition, implicit or explicit, or even an approximate sense. In the hands of its users, "screwball" seems to refer to a general impression of zaniness received by the critic.

A working definition is provided by Howard Hawks, in speaking of *Bringing up Baby*.

I think the picture had a great fault and I learned an awful lot from it. There were no normal people in it. Everyone you met was a screwball. Since that time I have learned my lesson and I don't intend ever again to make everybody crazy. If the gardener had been normal, if the sheriff had been just a perplexed man from the country—but as it was they were all way off center.⁵

Hawks defines screwball comedy as a film in which everyone is a screwball. He seems to limit the category to one instance and claims to regret that as a mistake, but Hawks's definition does have to do with structural factors, not with im-

pressions of craziness. Its import is clarified by these observations on ancient comedy.

The representation of manners always supposes some philosophy of conduct, some standard by which we judge, and some method of discovering it. Aristotle had only put it into form when he laid down his doctrine of the Mean. This doctrine is at the root of Theophrastus's *Characters*, and is everywhere implied by such comedies as Menander's. Virtue once admitted to be the mean, it became necessary to define all the extremes, the too little and too much of the social appearances of man.⁶

Against this backdrop screwball comedy is that which omits (or departs from) the philosophy of conduct traditional to comedy. In a comedy of characters who are all crazy, there can be no mean or standard. Even to say that all are in excess implies an external standard since there is no inner one.

But in what is called screwball comedy there often is comparative judgment of behavior and therefore at least an inchoate "philosophy of conduct." It is certainly not abstract like Aristotle's *Ethics*, it may be closer to Lévi-Straussian "savage thought," a thinking with empirical entities. In *The Awful Truth* and *His Girl Friday*, the Ralph Bellamy character is exemplar and exaggeration of conventional morality—both a character norm, against which to contrast the eccentricities of the leads, and a social norm, against which the film directs its satire. (These functions are not always embodied in a single character.) The main characters are screwballs in relation to him, but this is not mere madness, for it exemplifies the value of spontaneity, which reigns supreme in thirties romantic comedy, where it stands in for and includes wit, intelligence, genuine feeling vs. conventional response, adaptable moral response, vitality, life. In films without a Bellamy type, less prominent background figures such as policemen, judges, storekeepers, relatives perform one or both functions. In both films mentioned, the heroines plan to marry Bellamy at one point, which indicates that they waver between the two moralities.

Holiday would not be called a screwball comedy by most. The action is carefully plotted, emerges logically from consistent, well-motivated characters, etc. It is a well-made film of a well-made play. Yet the main characters Linda and Casey (and the Potters) are celebrated as some kind of

screwballs in contrast to the convention-bound, predictable other characters. Its philosophy of conduct is clearcut, but it champions a pair of (semi-)screwballs. Is it a screwball comedy?

A different instance is Preston Sturges, in whose films all characters speak a heady, epigrammatic prose, improbable in all but a few cases. Probability is violated in this respect and in some outrageous plot twists (usually at the end), but there are few if any screwball characters if screwball means to *act* spontaneously and crazily. The dialogue is the main, usually the only crazy element. The actions, events, plots sometimes are rather conventional, predictable. The characters played by Joel McCrea, Henry Fonda, Eddie Bracken, even William Demarest are not "spontaneous." They perform no "flips" like Johnny Case in *Holiday* and hardly, if ever, run—as the characters in *Baby* do constantly. They rarely laugh, sigh, sing, or do slapstick like McCarey's characters. Mainly they exchange words—it is the words which flip, sigh, run, get out of breath. But at this level—the lines themselves are screwball. They may come out of any figure in the frame and very often express surprising sentiments. Character consistency is often sacrificed for a good speech—another screwball element (or is it?).

We have chased the notion of screwball around the clock of filmic elements. We went in one door and came out another—without encountering an iota of certainty or consistency, not even a vector between two points that pointed in a definite direction.

4

If we cannot define romantic comedy, can we talk about it at all? Aristotle says no. Wittgenstein says yes.

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. . . .

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic-games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say "There *must* be something, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to

all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that . . . we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail . . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances. . . ."

5

Romantic comedy is a family of resemblances. Filmic romantic comedy is one branch of that family but also, as we have seen, a family in itself with diverse sub-branches. Since the branches of romantic comedy include entire art forms and their traditions—ballet, drama, painting, novel, opera, poem, symphony—it is necessarily true that the differences among them, which are material, are greater than the similarities, which are semantic, abstract, thematic. (As is the heading "romantic comedy" itself.) This is why transformations of subjects or themes from one medium to another are never automatic and never equal and why they offer an excellent perspective on the signifying processes of both, especially on the second or receiving system, on which the burden of transformation falls.

Consider the oft-told story of Ben Hecht's adaptation of Noel Coward's *Design for Living*—what is its point? Hecht is said to have boasted that he had kept only one line of the original (or was it a line from *Hay Fever*?), but critics agree that the film is far inferior to the play, even those virtually uncritical of Lubitsch's work. This story, like all Hollywood stories, emphasizes personalities, but far more important is the work process. Under the prevailing censorship, a woman could not live sexually with a man if they were not married, let alone two. The suggestion that Leo and Otto had been or were lovers was also inadmissible. The play (or its title, though even that no longer made sense) had to be turned toward an acceptable category, in this case competition between two men for a girl, with the twists that it remains cheerful to the end and that there is no final choice. For Hecht or any Hollywood writer the project was the same—to turn *Design for Living* into a romantic comedy.

6

Semi-Tough (1972) is a non-romantic comedy,* a football/sex/Texas-boy novel (by Dan Jenkins) that is transformed into a romantic comedy of the same name (1977—written by Walter Bernstein, directed by Michael Ritchie) at a time when the concept of romantic comedy itself seems vaguely problematic, extinct, or transformed. Thus in considering this problem, we are defining and pursuing an equation with two unknowns. What is romantic comedy now? How is this particular non-romantic comedy transformed into one? There are also two (more or less) knowns that we may use—what romantic comedy used to be and what this non-romantic comedy was before transformation.

The novel *Semi-Tough* (1972) belongs to a tradition of vernacular fiction that goes back (at least) to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). The tradition is a popular one—at its beginnings opposed to high literature—and has often been a profitable one. Twain himself was a best-selling author and the Huck Finn formula—colorful (rural) characters recounting colorful adventures in a colorful idiom—has been the basis for countless books (and later films) including *True Grit*, *No Time for Sergeants*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Little Big Man*. *Semi-Tough* too is narrated by its central character, Billy Clyde Puckett. His diction is far less distinct, region-specific, and consistent than Huck's because it is a composite of Texas-, New York-, and football-ese and because it developed in an age of media saturation of virtually all regions. Even so it is the vernacular narration of Billy Clyde and its interaction with the events recounted which organize the *enunciation* of the book and the reader's pleasure in reading it. Word choice, distinctive local constructions, dialects are far less important here than certain rhythms of spoken speech (more or less Texan) which strongly imply a listener and indeed, though not too forcibly, specific listener reactions. The reader is worked into these rhythms and laughs or whatever in the right places. When the words

*Of course the book has its own comedy and its own romance. These are transformed entirely in making it into a romantic comedy.



Top: The stage version of DESIGN FOR LIVING [with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne]. Below: The film version [Gary Cooper, Miriam Hopkins, Fredric March]. Right: SEMI-TOUGH [Kris Kristofferson, Jill Clayburgh, Burt Reynolds].



are themselves funny, the effect is doubled. Like all good comic timing, it is the effect.

7

The book's plot recalls Twain also. Three childhood friends from Texas now live in New

York—football pros and roommates Billy Clyde and Shake Tiller and ad woman Barbara Jane Bookman. Shake and Barbara Jane have been romantically involved since high school. The three are roughly equivalent to Huck, Tom and Becky Thatcher in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

Barbara Jane is from the highest class in the region just as Becky is the daughter of a judge. Tom is a middle-class boy, Huck a semi-orphan and outcast, a member of the lowest white class. So Shake's father owns a paint store while Billy Clyde is an orphan/outcast. "My daddy ran off before I ever knew him . . . My mamma was a waitress and maybe a couple of other things, and she ran off, too. Which left me with Uncle Kenneth, who was not much more than a golf hustler, a pool shark and a pretty good gin rummy stud."

We ask the question that is fundamental to literary semiotics, New Criticism, and various old criticisms: how does the first-person narration and vernacular idiom interact with the story? (On this point alone *Huck Finn* leaves the others far behind.) Billy Clyde's perspective and diction are used mainly to add salt to the games, orgies, New York and Texas types that he describes. (Similarly his outcast status is a childhood note that has virtually no effect on the rest of the book.) There is a possible exception. The book builds to a double climax of pre-game orgy and Super-Bowl. But there is a third climax concerning the dawning of love between Billy Clyde and Barbara Jane. This "new hermeneutic" is introduced before the telling of the game and finished later. Billy Clyde tells of Shake's not appearing after the game and of Barbara Jane's suggestions after a while that they get together. He also narrates his own refusals, continued even when Shake writes them to get together, without comment. She guesses what he might be thinking, occasionally he says what he is thinking in dialogue, but he never speaks it directly as narrator. This device is familiar from Hemingway and others. The first-person narration creates tension and defines character (and sometimes an ethics or a metaphysical position) by what it does not say, by its avoidance of areas or topics to which it has access. At the end of his account—during which he is presumably working through the taboos inhibiting him, Billy Clyde describes their finally hitting the right mood and beginning to make love, then stops.

*PLOT SUMMARY: Barbara Jane returns from a several-month absence. During this time Shake has gotten heavily into

The film drops nearly all of the book's football and casual sex and all of its material about the characters' shared childhood. It makes the three friends roommates. It eliminates the love relationship between Shake and Barbara Jane—none of the three has apparently had sex with another when the film opens. This has been called the film's *Design for Living* premise, but it is not that. In the play the three try each of three possible pairings before they go off to live as three at the final curtain. The initial arrangement of *Semi-Tough* is merely a set-up for romantic comedy of a more usual sort—a competition of two men for a woman that will favor first one then the other.*

The film has no narrator, no voice-over, it presents the action objectively. Billy Clyde's book project is retained as a narrative episode—a few scenes show him writing and taping. This has only to do with the enounced (the told) whereas the taping is the enunciation principle of the entire book as well as sometimes part of the enounced, as when Billy Clyde describes himself speaking to the recorder, etc. The film plays Gene Autry songs almost constantly, sometimes diegetically when the characters play them, listen to them and react, sometimes non-diegetically over a football game, etc. Perhaps the ubiquitous voice of Autry, with its recurring "I" and "I'm," stands in for the absent narrational voice of Billy Clyde as a displaced principle of enunciation.

BEAT—"it changed my life." This change precipitates changes in the other characters and their relationships and leads to all the events of the plot. Barbara Jane admires Shake's new self-mastery, they become closer, by the next road game they are sleeping together. Billy Clyde's distress is expressed in various ways (to the audience only), though the exact cause is unclear. He counter-attacks by proposing to write a book but he blows this bid for her esteem by making a joke of it. At the next game week, Shake saves a life through BEAT, Barbara Jane's anxiety at the event becomes hysterical admiration for Shake, and they decide to marry. At this Billy Clyde drops the book and carries the battle to the enemy's territory by faking his way through a BEAT weekend and pretending to have IT, just as Barbara Jane suffers through to please Shake and does not get IT. During the wedding preparations Billy Clyde plays off Shake's anxieties that a "mixed marriage" will not work; Shake says "I don't" at the altar, the ceremony becomes a brawl, Billy Clyde and Barbara Jane escape. He says they should go to Hawaii, they walk together down the beach.

9

He (Philip Barry) was a subtle writer, but nothing muddy about him. A clarity at the back of it all. I don't like muddiness, I like clarity. It has nothing to do with being literal, and it doesn't cut out mystery—of course, there are times when you don't want to say everything—but I like to know that I can look into the pool of water when I want to and find it clear at the bottom.

—George Cukor, *On Cukor*⁸

Would sophisticated characters walk into this drama-machine so naively or be so surprised by pitfall No. 1, sexual jealousy? The book's characters might discuss the proposal amusingly but each would vote no at the end. The film begins with three friendships and moves to one love match then to another. What is the nature and strength of the friendships, of the loves, how and why do they arise or fall apart when they do? On these points the film is unclear.

When do Billy Clyde's feelings for Barbara Jane change—before she returns from Africa? An early line "love me or leave me alone" suggests yes but if so how far back do they go and why hasn't he acted on them? When the Shake-Barbara Jane romance starts Billy Clyde is evidently unhappy but why—exclusion by friends, jealousy of Barbara Jane, sex rivalry with Shake or slow-ripening love for Barbara Jane quickened by the pressure of events? These are confused or insufficiently differentiated—Billy Clyde's quest remains ambiguous.

Friendship is partway established between Shake and Barbara Jane and between Billy Clyde and Barbara Jane but not between the two men. Though they are said to be old and close friends, what we see is Billy Clyde competing with Shake ruthlessly for Barbara Jane. "Nobody ever said it wasn't going to be semi-tough." The book's line and title refer to the Super-Bowl. In the film Billy Clyde speaks the line to himself about breaking up the wedding and winning Barbara Jane. Thus the film's displacement of competition from sport to love and its elimination of friendship and teamwork.

10

Basic to romantic comedy is the dyad old love/new love. Nearly all romantic comedies may be divided according to it. *Bringing Up Baby*, *Holi-*

day, etc. treat new love; *The Awful Truth*, *His Girl Friday*, *Twentieth Century*, etc. treat old love. *The Philadelphia Story* treats both, though the new is only a flash, as do most films by Lubitsch.

Semi-Tough is a story of new love and of new rivalries for it, wherein ruthlessness, stunts and dissembling are traditional. But when a story of new love is laid over a story of old friendship the results are unsavory and unattractive. Were Cary Grant the close friend and work partner of Ralph Bellamy, his taunts and ruses would not be so funny. A work that faced squarely this disturbing mixture and its consequences might well be interesting. But if it insists on the new love quest and sweeps the residues under the rug, as this film does, then the viewer will be confused and disturbed at the end, perhaps without knowing why. This happens here when the hero is shown triumphant in love, but his friend lies slain by him just offscreen.

11

Friendship must be established and built, not just posited, even if (especially if) the friends later fall out over a love object. This is proven by the films of Hawks and Ford, among others, as it is by Coward's *Design for Living*.

In *Semi-Tough* both friendship and love are posited abstractly. We must infer Billy Clyde's love for Barbara Jane from his writing and disrupting the wedding, not from the way the two relate to each other onscreen. Their confrontations, in brief, tangential scenes, are awkward. Another "obligatory" scene that is missing is one between Shake and Billy Clyde confronting the issue of Barbara Jane. As BEAT follower Shake might propose the talk, though follow through glibly. Billy Clyde might become tense or refuse to take it seriously or actually speak his feelings. How it was done would not matter, their usual banter would suffice, so long as it were banter under pressure.

Another posit: Billy Clyde is said to like only fucking and football but neither liking is shown. He has two meager sexual encounters—why only this for an alleged stud? Because even a semi-intense scene between Billy Clyde and a woman might throw off his alleged passion for Barbara

Jane and the campaign he is mounting to fulfill it. (In very skillful hands such a scene could be used to clarify his feelings for Barbara Jane.) In all these respects the film lives a life of denial to protect its house of cards premise. It might have been better to accept the weakness of the premise and go after some old-fashioned character interaction. In this way the premise might have been abandoned or rediscovered or changed or developed.

It is true that some classic films present love indirectly—to be consistent with hard-bitten heroes and/or the conflict of strong egos too proud to submit to love. This is the case in scripts by Jules Furthman, especially those directed by von Sternberg and Hawks (*Morocco*, *Shanghai Express*, *Only Angels Have Wings*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Rio Bravo*, etc.). Each of these films presents the love attraction early and with great vividness, often in great set pieces, so that later when we see the characters choking on the attraction as it slowly turns to love, we know what they are choking on. Furthman's law is that the hero cannot say "I love you"—hence the messages on mirrors, carvings on tables, two-headed coins, threatened handbills, tickets for the morning stage, bus, plane and boat. But the attraction has to be felt viscerally first if the later doubts, hesitations, betrayals, the goings back and forth, and the complex movement toward resolution are to make sense, have dramatic impact and emotional force. Otherwise one creates a set of logical complications that have no referent, the plot gets more and more abstract as it doubles over, achieves new levels of tangles in relation to its basic love premise—it refers to nothing in the viewer's emotional memory of the film. Of course this is a fine strategy for modernist films which proceed systematically, like Marguerite Duras's *Woman of the Ganges* and Yvonne Rainer's films, but we are not speaking of that here.

12 Heroine

At the start of the film, film and book Barbara Jane seem close—the changes do not seem to matter, but if we compare them at the end of the film, the difference is enormous. At the end,

Barbara Jane has just come close to a third marriage, been spurned by Shake, and hustled away by Billy Clyde. It dawns on her slowly that she has been a fool about Shake (going against her nature to learn BEAT), and that Billy Clyde has contrived to break up the wedding, therefore he must love her. She asks him "Do you want to marry me?" When he says no and suggests a trip to Hawaii, she asks like a child, "What will we do there?" The last-minute rescue from a bad wedding is a fixture of romantic comedy, but the pathetic dependence of the heroine on the rescuer is not. In thirties comedies the heroine might turn on her benefactor at rescue point and strip him of his pretensions. In *Morgan!* (1966), Vanessa Redgrave laughs at the disorder caused by her psychotic rescuer, and is thereby complicit in it. Even *The Graduate* (1967) does a better wedding breakup by playing it as drama rather than comedy and by having the heroine come to the hero. (When will we see a film in which the woman does the rescuing?) In *Semi-Tough* the heroine does nothing after the rescue except to be catatonic. We do not notice this on first viewing because the wedding brawl creates a slight sense of breathlessness that almost lasts through the final scene. The latter is very short anyway but is made to seem longer through a trick. The new couple takes a long slow walk down the beach as the camera watches them, a shot that continues as the credits come up. This fills out a sense of time while providing no new information or emotion. The hollowness of the film's romantic comedy premise surfaces here.

Billy Clyde's break-up and refusal may be meant to cure Barbara Jane of her marriage compulsion. He may sense that she marries knowing it will not work, therefore he will live with her to make their relationship last. This is a kindly guess as the script supplies few clues. Nor are there enough to evaluate such a supposition on Billy Clyde's part. In any case it implies a psychiatrist-patient or parent-child relation, not a romantic comedy one.

The final scene marks the collapse of the filmic Barbara Jane—it reveals that there never was a character at all. With her collapse, the film collapses. There can be no romantic comedy without strong heroines.

13

He'd [Jules Furthman] been writing a thing for Bacall for an introduction—really good scene, where she'd had her purse stolen. He said, "What do you think of it?" and I said, "Well, Jules, if anything makes me sexually excited it's a girl who's lost her purse." And he looked bemused and began to stare at me. "You son of a bitch," he said, and he walked out. And he came in and he wrote a story about how the girl stole a purse. Made a lot better picture.

—Howard Hawks⁹

We need not review Hegel on the master-slave dialectic or Simone de Beauvoir on the man-woman dialectic to observe that a fictive mode that debases the heroine thereby debases the hero also and thereby subverts itself. We note also that the novel's Barbara Jane is strong, independent, and virtually equal to her two friends. It is she who pursues Billy Clyde at the end, as the mate she believes best for her. The long last chapter concerns the overcoming of Billy Clyde's reservations. This makes the film's transformations especially alarming. As an answer to the question "What is romantic comedy now?" it is even more alarming.

Romantic comedy posited men and women willing to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties and capacities in sexual dialectic. Later work such as the Kanin-Gordon-Cukor films brought work, political dispute, and psychological complications to this engaged ground and extended the age range of its participants. What we begin to see now in films is a withdrawal of men and women from this ground (or of it from them). Or we see—in effect the same thing—false presences in the sexual dialectic or divided ones (one realizes at the end that one did not want to play the game at all) or commitments for trivial stakes only. It seems that when the new self pulls itself together, it is away from the ground of full sexual dialectic. To argue this is to argue the death of romantic comedy.

14 King Sun

One need not subscribe to any theory of art as mimesis to recognize that social and political changes have transformed the making and reception of romantic comedy since the classical period. These changes are vast, complex, interwoven, and not yet sufficiently understood in themselves to

permit application to subtopics like our own. This is true even if we limit ourselves to changes in the family and in sexual life: the doubling of the divorce rate in the last decade, the rise of the single parent, the political and social impact of feminist movements and gay rights movements, etc. One factor, the rise of working women, has been called "a revolution in the roles of women that . . . is a worldwide phenomenon, an integral part of a changing society. Its secondary and tertiary consequences are really unchartable."¹⁰ The striking fact is how little these changes have made their way into films of any kind, comedies, dramas, or documentaries.

We will discuss another factor, perhaps a simpler one, the sharply increased movement of the American population from (Eastern) cities to the Sunbelt in the last ten years. Since 1970 the nation's eight largest metropolitan areas have declined in population growth. This development stands in contrast with practically all preceding periods since 1790. The more rapid growths of large urban concentrations as compared to non-metropolitan territory has been one of the most persistent of American demographic trends. Five of the eight areas had a net loss of population during this period.

During the next 15 years there will be a pronounced shift of income away from the Northeast and North Central regions of the country to the Southern and Western regions. "The question is not so much one of decline but one of: Can the Northeast age gracefully?"¹¹

The romantic comedy has always been urban and urban-oriented, aggressively, smugly assuming the superiority of city over country. This pattern of thought and response is old and deep in US culture and European too. It characterizes the great age of industrialism and capitalist expansion, which is now beginning to be over.

In sophisticated films and plays, the sticks were always ridiculed, especially the visitor from the sticks, and the immigrant to the city from the country. The full fury of urban scorn was vented on those who retained any narcissistic pride in the provinces. The immigrant had to adapt to capitalism and its life ways in a hurry. *The Awful Truth*: "What's wrong with Oklahoma City?" "Nothing, Bruce, nothing." Jokes based on urban

superiority had an unquestioned sense for audiences for 180 years and more that they are beginning not to have. What sense does Walter Burns's put-down of Albany make (in *His Girl Friday*) now that New York City is dependent on Albany for survival?

What a cinema of the Sunbelt will be we do not know. (Perhaps *Badlands* [1974] and *Three Women* [1977] are versions of this. "The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me. —Pascal.)

15 Enunciation

Enunciation signifies the act of uttering a message. It is opposed to *énoncé* which signifies what is uttered. The system of enunciation which governs particular acts of enunciation is in turn governed by the semiotic system involved—which creates a limited number of enunciation possibilities—and by historical, social and other contextual factors. French linguist Emile Benveniste distinguishes two distinct and complementary systems of enunciation, that of story (*l'histoire*) and that of discourse (*discours*). In language these systems divide up all verb tenses between them—what does not belong to discourse (only the aorist) belongs to history.

The historical utterance . . . characterizes the narration of past events. These three terms "narration," "event," and "past," are of equal importance. Events that took place at a certain moment of time are presented without any intervention of the speaker in the narration. In order for them to be recorded as having occurred, these events must belong to the past.¹²

Discourse must be understood in its widest sense: every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way. It is primarily every variety of oral discourse of every nature and every level . . . But it is also the mass of writing that reproduces oral discourse or that borrows its manner of expression and its purposes: correspondence, memoirs, plays, didactic works, in short, all the genres in which someone addresses himself to someone, proclaims himself as the speaker, and organizes what he says in the category of person.¹³

Histoire suppresses or hides all traces of its telling, it refers neither to speaker or listener but only to the events it relates. The effects of different modes of enunciation on the receiver is a complex, largely uncharted area, but it is clear that *histoire*

in general is used to make the events related seem more real, vivid, present, whereas, *discours* modes continually break such illusions, or at least may do so.

Applying these concepts in film analysis creates several problems, the first of which is that films are apparently perceived as told in the present. That in any case is its most transparent mode, and in this it resembles *histoire*. Romantic comedies of all decades belong to this mode. They are dramatic—they present what is happening now, without mediation. Pace and timing are important and a sense that the characters are under pressure and must react quickly. Lines of dialogue are delivered fast, often unexpectedly, and must be countered fast. Of course this is carefully engineered illusion, but it is the impression which romantic comedy must create if it is to achieve the effects which define it.

Related to this enunciative mode is a thematic constant of romantic comedy (at least in the thirties)—an ethos of spontaneity. Not only are lines of dialogue rendered spontaneously, so are physical actions. We see Johnny Case's excited face and rising inflections in *Holiday* and suddenly he does a "flip," lands on his feet, utters a few more lines and goes out the door. Any evidence of enunciation in this passage would ruin the effect of the scene. Imagine a *film noir* (like *Raw Deal* [1949]) with ghostly voice-over, eerie music, expressionist lighting, webbed, tangled *mise-en-scène*: "I did a flip on my way out the door. As I stood there looking at my friends it seemed to me that everything was upside down. The room was going round and round . . . I knew that I had to get to Helen, who was waiting in the car, but I could not move." The example is ridiculous, I beg your indulgence, but it should make clear the difference between enunciation that is heavily marked and enunciation that is transparent and—very roughly—the kinds of subjects traditionally appropriate to each. (*Film noir* is especially interesting because its plethora of signifier chains, its multichanneled redundancy, works as often to pull the viewer in—i.e., the film naturalizes itself as "complex world"—as to distance the viewer.)

Works of *histoire* suppress signs of enunciation, but no work can do this completely. The analyst must look more carefully in such cases but all

works betray signs of their telling. *Baby's* first close-up, about a third of the way through, shows us Susan's distress at hearing that David is to be married. This shot betrays a previously transparent discourse—someone is showing us this detail, is marking it as important (so that we will understand Susan's behavior later). In *The Awful Truth* there is a gap after Bellamy departs—an affair for Jerry is needed in a hurry so that Lucy may play disrupter and the film continue. The film presents a rather typical montage of society column excerpts, shots of the couple at racetrack, watching polo, motorboating, etc., before the music dies down and the next funny scene starts. Here it is the banality of the presentation, the simplicity and obviousness of the message, the tediousness of its "process" that call attention to the enunciation, as well as its marked difference from the rest of the film and its odd placement in its late middle. Perhaps also the switching from dramatic/improvisational to narrational mode and from a constant use of scenes to a bracket syntagm. Thus a passage's difference from a film's principal mode of enunciation can mark one mode of transparent enunciation from its fellows.

Romantic comedy's banishment of enunciation marks is reflected in *Semi-Tough* too. The book has an interesting enunciation structure: not only a first person but a second person too. Billy Clyde narrates the book to Jim Tom, a reporter friend who will edit it. Every so often he asks Jim Tom if he's listening and tells him what to disregard if he wishes etc. At times he speculates alone or in imaginary colloquy with Jim Tom what the publisher's editor is likely to think. Billy Clyde sometimes describes himself taping, the presence of others while he's taping; he also has to account for all his comings and goings which relate to the taping—why he can tape now, etc. And of course he cannot both play football and narrate what is happening on the field. This requires continual maneuver. The film eliminates these complexities in one stroke, opting for the dramatic mode of entirely present action and dialogue rather than narration. In doing so it maximizes the values of spontaneity and vividness and diminishes those of perspective, layering, temporal and presentational complexity. In short it adopts the enunciative mode that has always been obligatory for romantic

comedy. This dictates in part the transformation pattern that romantic comedy imposes on its diverse materials—which is to say that it is part of the definition of romantic comedy.

16

At one point in *Semi-Tough* the heroine says to the hero, "How come we never fucked?" It is arguable that romantic comedy depends upon the suppression of this question and that with its surfacing romantic comedy becomes impossible.

The sexual question always circulates in romantic comedy, it is its utterance that is forbidden. On this prohibition romantic comedy stands. Indeed one can see the entire spectrum of romantic comedy as so many variations on this unuttered question. In comedies of old love, the unspoken question is "Why did we stop fucking?" In comedies of new love, it is "Why don't we fuck now?" There is a virtual Freudian declension system operating here, the terms of which define the principal modes of romantic comedy.*

It seems, then, that the various modes of romantic comedy posit a condition of non-fucking. In comedies of new love this is the initial situation; the plot extends it by prolonging aversion or indifference, by mistaken identity, and/or by a repetition of frustrating encounters, etc. Old love comedies posit a cessation of fucking, due to suspected infidelity (*The Awful Truth*), to "leaving the newspaper business to settle down" (*His Girl Friday*), or whatever. In comedies of both kinds it is the entire film, but no line in it, that poses and explores the question "Why are we not fucking?" and "How can we get (back) to fucking?" Romantic comedy lives on the problem of non-fucking and is over when, and only when, it is resolved, when fucking (re)starts. This is explicit in *The Awful Truth*, when the boy and girl figures on the clock finally go through the same door, just before "The End;" and in *It Happened One Night*, when the "Walls of Jericho" come down at the same moment. These films end just as the

*From his analyses of Schreber's memoirs, Freud concluded that the principal forms of paranoia can all be represented as contradictions of the single proposition: "I (a man) love him (a man)," and that they exhaust all the possible ways in which such contradictions can be formulated.

characters begin to fuck. In *Holiday* and other films, the film ends as the characters "go off" together, marking the same occasion less literally. *Semi-Tough* concludes this way, but the overall film is muddled because the characters are childhood friends—it is the story both of new love complications and of exploring an old bar, "Why haven't we ever fucked?" In fact the second question is not explored—beyond a throwaway from Billy Clyde about how they had meant too much to each other for "fun" sex along the way.

An exception: Lubitsch's *One Hour With You* (a remake of *The Marriage Circle*) is a romantic comedy about a happy couple. Of course the plot turns on a slow-building threat to the marriage, but it breaks them up for only a short time (one night) before they get back together.

Note that in romantic comedy resolution of the problem of non-fucking involves both a theoretic question and a pragmatic one (as in psychoanalysis). Determining why we are not fucking and overcoming the barrier by actually fucking are quite different things, though romantic comedies and their characters consistently confuse them. The theoretic answer to the question does not necessarily lead to the desired result and achievement of the desired result does not necessarily imply that the theoretic question has been answered. Perhaps it is anxiety over the problem and the desire for its pragmatic overcoming, both overdetermined, that are the mainspring of the genre. Seeking theoretic knowledge is one solution among others that are tried, with no very strict housekeeping as to which one actually works. For one thing, there is not the time, patience or mental calm necessary to try one solution at a time—the notion itself is comic (though not romantic)—all are tried at once. This is a realm in which "savage thought" and *bricolage* dominate, despite a surface appearance of rationality.

Although romantic comedy is about fucking and its absence, this can never be said nor referred to directly. This is perhaps the fascination of romantic comedy. It implies a process of perpetual displacement, of euphemism and indirection at all levels, a latticework of dissembling and hiding laid over what is constantly present but denied, unspoken, unshown. We perceive the sublimation system and the thing itself at every point, a system

of repression suffused with a libidinal glow. In "Humor" (1927) Freud defined humor (as opposed to jokes) as proceeding from the super-ego, in reward for a survival-enhancing act or attitude.

Language in romantic comedy has a special status. What stands between sexual desire and its fulfillment is language. In romantic comedy language is the medium in which all things occur, arise and are discharged or not. Visual metaphors like figures on a clock and walls trumpeted down, and actions such as "going off" are resorted to for the absolutely unsayable. In romantic comedy, it is the past sex lives of the characters and present sexual problems that constitute a referent that cannot be named directly. *Angel* and *The Awful Truth*, both concerned with the possible infidelity of a marriage partner, cleverly make the enunciative conditions of romantic comedy the predicament of the inquiring characters—they have only indirect, oblique signs to interpret. Also in both the question is never resolved, for the character or for us. The enunciation system is inscribed by displacement in the plot. Lubitsch's dollies into and static shots of closing bedroom doors do the same thing at a different level.

The effective prohibitions of romantic comedy are prohibitions within language. It is this that makes speaking the question "Why haven't we ever fucked?" destructive of romantic comedy. It wrecks the language-game on which it rests. In that game you can refer to anything but cannot speak of it. (See again the works of Lubitsch.)

The first reason that *Semi-Tough* says "How come we never fucked?" is that it can say it. In the thirties such language and such linguistic reference were prohibited—you could not say "Why haven't we ever made love?" either. That you can say something does not mean that you must do so. But has any realm of art invented for itself a system of censorship not imposed upon it? On this ground alone, it may be that romantic comedy is not an art that can flourish in this period.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, tr. James Strachey, New York, 1960.

2. Ben Jonson, reprinted in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, Detroit, 1962, at p. 534, pp. 537-38.
3. Lope de Vega, reprinted in *ibid.*, at 540, pp. 542-3.
4. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, New York, 1957, pp. 253-254.
5. Interview with Howard Hawks by Peter Bogdanovich, MOVIE No. 5, p. 11.
6. G.S. Gordon, "Theophrastus and His Imitators", in G.S. Gordon (Ed.), *English Literature and the Classics*, New York, 1969, p. 53.
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, 1958, pp. 31e-32e.

8. Gavin Lambert, *On Cukor*, New York, 1972, p. 123.
9. Interview with Howard Hawks by Peter Lehman et. al., *Wide Angle*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 1976), p. 57.
10. New York Times, "Vast Changes in Society Traced to the Rise of Working Women," November 29, 1977, p. 1 and p. 28.
11. New York Times, "Influx of Population Down in Urban Areas," June 16, 1975, p. 1, p. 17.
12. Benveniste, Emile, *Problems in General Linguistics*, tr. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables, 1971, p. 206.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9.

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Bertrand Tavernier: The Constraints of Convention

The recent release in this country of *The Clockmaker* (1973) and *Let Joy Reign Supreme* (1974), the first films of French critic-turned-director Bertrand Tavernier, reveals a major and surprisingly mature talent. These works fill what he sees as a need for polemical films, especially those "where the polemical unfolds at an everyday level." This concern with the polemics—and the politics—of everyday life is a quality that defines a new generation of promising young European directors, among them Tavernier, Tanner, Gorretta, and Fassbinder. This post-1968 generation is characterized by their synthesis of the traditional humanistic film, with its emphasis on character and "the everyday," and the political film, with its emphasis on ideology and the extraordinary event.

What sets Tavernier apart from the others in this group is his interest in the kind of genre film that was for so long the staple of the motion picture industry. As an interviewer and critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif*, and as a freelance press agent, Tavernier promoted the American genre film. As a director, he has demonstrated that in skillful hands the conventional structures of the genre film can be made to serve the original purposes of the *film d'auteur*. But further than this, Tavernier uses popular genres to explore the very nature of convention itself, to deepen our awareness of the way conventions—

social, political, aesthetic—define not only what we can do and who we can be, but also how and what we can know. In particular, it is the constraints of convention that are the major concerns of these two films: *The Clockmaker*, a police story based on a Simenon novel, explores the social and political constraints of convention in contemporary society, whereas *Let Joy Reign Supreme*, an eighteenth-century costume film derived largely from historical accounts, probes the epistemological constraints inherent in the various genres of historical discourse.¹

The Clockmaker is about a middle-aged and middle-class widower named Michel Descombes (Philippe Noiret), whose apparently ordinary and orderly life is destroyed when he learns suddenly that his teenage son, Bernard, has murdered a man. The victim, Razon, was a right-wing informant in the factory where Bernard's girlfriend, Liliane, worked. The young couple are pursued offscreen while in Lyons, Police Inspector Guiboud (Jean Rochefort) keeps Descombes informed about the progress of the manhunt. But Guiboud's interest in Descombes is more than professional, for he, too, is a father who seeks to understand his children. The complex relationship between the two men provides the dramatic center for the film: Descombes comes gradually to an awareness that the seemingly sympathetic Guiboud is his antagonist. The Police Inspector is, in fact, the